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Exploring the Auditory Aspects of Aptitude
for Intensive Modern Foreign Language Learning

By

Antoine Rashid Al-Haik

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DISSERTATION

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Committee in Charge

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To my wife Gladys
and my daughters
Cynthia
Sylvia
Jasmine, and
Dianne

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FOREWORD

This study was done in the setting of the Defense Language Institute, West Coast Branch, Presidio of Monterey, California (DLIWC). This Branch, together with its sister branches and Systems Development Agency, comprise the Defense Language Institute (DLI), the largest foreign language training establishment in the Western world, with headquarters in Washington, D. C.

About 4,000 students, mostly young military personnel, are trained and graduated from DLIWC annually in some twenty-four languages. Members of the faculty are highly trained native or semi-native speakers of the language.

Although the courses are specifically designed to give prominence to the listening and speaking skills, reading and writing are also taught as secondary objectives. The method of instruction used may be described as intensive, audiolingual, direct, and inductive-deductive.

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CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Background

Prior to World War II there was little justification for investigating foreign language aptitude in terms of its underlying auditory factors. Studying a foreign language in high school or in college was considered to involve basically a form of mental activity not very different from that required for the study of any other school subject. Thus, prediction of success in this area of learning was largely accomplished by the use of IQ tests and past academic performance. Nevertheless, voices of caution against the use of intelligence tests as predictors of foreign language performance began to be heard. In his study of the subject, Henmon (1929a, p. 12) states that although the predictive validities of intelligence tests lie somewhere between .20 and .60 these tests cannot be used alone to any reasonable degree of satisfaction. A search for specific abilities seemed to provide a better answer for subsequent investigators. Richardson (1933, p. 169) concludes in one of his studies that

"success in a modern foreign language seems to be the result, to a considerable degree at least, of special abilities or aptitudes not measured by a general mental test." This conclusion was reaffirmed much later by Carroll (1962a, p. 89) when he hypothesized that "facility in learning to speak and understand a foreign language is a fairly specialized talent (or group of talents), . . . relatively independent of those traits ordinarily included under 'intelligence'"

Early efforts were indeed made to improve prediction in this area by devising more refined instruments specifically geared to measure aptitude for foreign language learning. Two examples of such instruments are Henmon's Prognosis Tests in the Modern Foreign Languages (1929b) and Symonds' Foreign Language Prognosis Test (1929). These and other early tests generally consist of (1) tests of ability and achievement in English language vocabulary, grammar, spelling, etc., and (2) work-sample tests involving short lessons in the language to be studied or in an artificial language. The main feature of these tests is that they are of the paper-and-pencil type emphasizing ability to deal with the intellectual problem-solving aspects of learning the written form of a foreign language. This emphasis is in line with the objectives of reading and

translation, which were prevalent in the learning of foreign languages in the United States before the advent of World War II. During and after this war, new criteria of performance were sought to meet new requirements. The United States armed services recognized the need for intensive foreign language training of a considerable number of recruits in a relatively short period of time, giving top priority to the skills involved in speaking the colloquial form of the language. Since this type of foreign language skills was not exactly taught in high schools and colleges at that time, the Army developed its own method of foreign language instruction to meet this objective. Carroll (1963, pp. 1062-64) describes the characteristics of what came to be known as the "Army Method," as follows:

1. The spoken form is presented and learned before the written form.
2. The method makes use of the results of contrastive analysis between the learner's native language and the foreign language.
3. Overlearning through "pattern practice" is stressed.
4. The desirability of simulating "real-life" communication situations is well recognized.

A fifth point should be added to the above list. The method also required that instruction be conducted by a native speaker (or a non-native with almost native proficiency) of the target language.

This change in objectives was naturally accompanied by a change in methodology. According to Brooks (1960, p. 123), approximately 80 percent of the beginning modern foreign language student's time should be allocated to listening and speaking activities and only 20 percent to reading and writing. The National Education Association (NEA; 1960, p. 9) advises that "the student should understand the foreign language as it is spoken by native speakers. He should speak the foreign language in everyday situations with reasonable fluency and correctness, and with pronunciation acceptable to the native speakers of the language. He should read the foreign language easily and without conscious translation. He should be able to communicate in writing anything he can say."

The new trend in thinking and methodology recognizes the diversity and specificity of talents involved in modern foreign language learning, as is clearly demonstrated by many investigators in the field. In his advice to the foreign language learner, Walsh (1965) explains that: (1) there are approximately

3,500 languages spoken in the world today, 140 of them with one million or more speakers; (2) when learning their own language, children practice by listening and talking. By constant trial and error they assemble in their minds a simple model of the language--each individual has his own grammar of the language; (3) languages are different. The new language is not expected to be like English. The new sounds and new meanings are fitted into non-English patterns; (4) in all languages, writing has followed speech by many thousands of years. Most of the languages have not yet been put into written form by their speakers. The Roman alphabet used in learning the different languages of Western Europe may cause interference on account of dissimilar pronunciation of identical letters in these languages; (5) learning a foreign language is mainly a physical activity, not just memorizing rules. The interference of native language habits with one's new language habits may be a cause for many learning problems. Emphasis should therefore be placed on learning by imitation and by analogy rather than on rule memorization. Intensive practice is essential; (6) reading and writing become easier after learning how to speak the language. A reader is apt to use some form of pronunciation even if he has to invent one. Therefore, it is advisable to

